

Four-Ship to Disaster

by Capt. Jason Schuette

I wondered for a long time if this story would be worthy of *Approach*. The lesson is simple, but this near-miss happened more than once and could happen again. More importantly, after more than two years in the fleet, this incident left me the most frightened I have ever been, including tanking from KC-135s at night in IMC.

We were returning as a four-ship from a Yuma det. I was dash last. The first half of the flight was uneventful, given the fact that we were tanking off of a KC-10 and the weather was clear. Our goal was to be overhead Cherry Point during daylight to fly the division into the break.

About an hour out of Cherry Point, Dash 2 developed oil-pressure problems, which made them a bit nervous. However, they decided to press as the engine was staying within limits at the proper rpm.

Although we had launched on time, the winds along the way were not favorable, hard to believe heading east. Consequently, it would be a bit darker than we had anticipated. Also, although the forecast weather into Cherry Point was VMC, as we got closer, it appeared we would have to penetrate some thick cloud cover to reach VMC. ATIS was calling the field clear. Although I didn't say anything, I assumed we were going to press for the overhead.

This was where the fun began. It was getting dark, and I figured that, as a division, we would have to make an IMC penetration to VMC, with a weak jet in the formation.

While we were above the clouds VMC, I wondered, why not get separate clearances? Although not as cool, it would make life easier, not to mention safer.

As predicted, once we started to descend, the weather became a signifi-

cant factor. We spent what seemed an eternity in the clouds as approach vectored us around at 11,000 feet. We were balanced, which put me on the left side of the formation, not the favored position of Prowler pilots. Then my section lead's lights began to fade; I figured the clouds were thickening.

As I moved closer, trying to keep sight, I realized it wasn't thicker clouds but ice on my front windscreen! To improve my visibility, I started moving up and closer to keep my lead on the clear canopy, but at that moment, the division turned into me. All I remember is staring at a whole lot of airplane and wondering what metal on metal would sound like. Fortunately, I didn't find out.

As mentioned earlier, the division was fishing around at 11,000 feet. The clouds were reported scattered at 9,000 feet and below, yet not once did the lead try to get us into the clear. He did begin to see the futility of the situation and decided to split up the formation to land as individuals, first getting rid of our lame bird and then peeling the rest of us off,

still in the goo. After that, the flight was uneventful except for my vertigo, which eventually dissipated.

So what did I learn from that little experience? First, at many points leading up to my scariest moment, a link in the chain could have been broken. Anyone, myself included, could have recommended splitting up the flight. I could have called lost sight and made a play for the clear air below. Either way, I think it would have improved my situation.

Second, because we perceived that our lead didn't appreciate constructive debriefings, we never did one, which is another reason why I'm writing this story. This wasn't the first time I had flown into IMC conditions in a division. Without a debrief to consider all points of view, we didn't discuss the learning points, and this situation could happen again.

OPNAVINST 3710 doesn't prohibit flying divisions into IMC conditions; however, I don't know of any lead who would do such a thing unless it was critical to flying the mission. 🦅

Capt. Schuette flies with VMAQ-4.